

CREATING AND SUSTAINING SECOND GENERATION INSTITUTIONS OF FORESIGHT

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Institutions of Foresight (IOFs) are purpose-built organisations that focus on one or another aspect of futures work. Some remain viable over decades, while others quickly disappear. The key point is that both successes and failures provide useful pointers for creating and sustaining second-generation IOFs. So this chapter draws on the experience of the Australian Commission for the Future (CFF). It considers the twelve years of its existence, attempts to summarise its achievements, and then suggests some lessons, or broad design principles, that may be useful to other such initiatives around the world. The Commission was launched in a blaze of publicity in early 1986. It existed in one form or another for twelve years, had four directors, spent in excess of AUD \$8 million, was privatised and vanished from public view during 1996. After many ups and downs, after a number of false dawns and unsuccessful attempts at revival, the last chairman of the board ran out of inspiration in June 1998 and the CFF closed its doors for the last time.

It is no exaggeration to say that, over this period, the CFF operated in a sea of indifference and even of hostility. Indeed, many people suggested that the CFF was never a fully satisfactory organisation. Yet there are powerful reasons to suggest that the broad conclusions that were widely drawn were wrong. They took the form of, 'we've been there, done that; it didn't work, so the whole idea of an organisation focused specifically on the future should be abandoned.' If this notion persists then we will certainly be in for a much rougher ride throughout the twenty-first century than anyone would rationally desire. So the purpose of this chapter is to suggest that, far from dismissing them, *we can learn from and apply the experience of first-generation IOFs* like the CFF. An international program of study and research is urgently needed for this purpose. If we wish to exert any real control, claim any sort of autonomy, over our collective futures, intending social innovators will deliberately embody these institutional learnings in a new generation of IOFs.

Why are institutions of foresight needed?

It should be obvious to anyone who cares to look that the on-rushing waves of social, economic, technical and environmental change that we confront, together make up an outlook which is novel in the history of our species.¹ What motivates most futurists - and certainly those who have devoted their lives to this area - is a sense that we should, as individuals, organisations and as a species, learn to pay attention. That is, to read the signals of change and act accordingly. But this is asking for something that goes a long way beyond traditional expressions of prudence and foresight that can be found in various cultures.²

As noted before, short-term thinking rules in governments, education systems and, with some exceptions, in business too. This can be regarded as one of the main ‘perceptual defects’ that we have collectively inherited from the industrial era. It actively de-focuses and de-emphasises the very innovative process that constitutes an historical breakthrough and which is comprehensively needed in our time. This book suggests that the breakthrough in question involves the capacity to create *well-grounded and coherent forward views*. Short-term thinking pushes out of sight the source and springboard for rationales and strategies of adaptive change. That this is not merely an incidental oversight can be seen when we consider aspects of dominant ideologies. John Saul has this to say. He writes:

corporatism - with its market- and technology-led delusions - is profoundly tied to a mechanistic view of the human race. *This is not an ideology with any interest in or commitment to the shape of society or the individual as citizen.* It is fixed upon a rush to use machinery - inanimate or human - while these are still at full value; before they suffer any depreciation. ³ (Emphasis added)

This passage helps to explain why, in a broad social sense, there is so little structural support for long-term thinking. While a number of government-driven foresight initiatives have become established in several nations, these are recent developments, the outcomes of which remain uncertain. Most forward-looking initiatives remain associated with technology trends, conventional (short term) planning, commercial or financial speculation and the development of corporate strategies. To date, the amount of futures work carried out by public bodies in the public interest is minimal. This is a huge oversight – a dysfunctional gap in social administration. Forward views of all types are too significant, too central to the process of developing high-quality responses, to be marginalised. Yet that remains the current state of play. Here we again see the limits of present cultural development in the LL quadrant. The world is facing multiple threats (and, let us recall, the prospect of moving forward to new stages of civilised life). Yet a civilisation overcommitted to science, technology, instrumental reason and economic rationalism cannot clearly see them, nor respond adequately to them, in part because its preferred ‘ways of knowing’ and of bestowing value and significance actively de-focus the futures domain.

The Australian CFF was one of a number of national government supported foresight initiatives created during the expansive 1970s and 1980s. As with the premature closure of the American Office of Technology Assessment (OTA), its demise is regrettable. But, properly understood (i.e. in terms of a process of social and cultural legitimation), IOFs are *experimental* organisations created to address new needs and to explore strategies of a type and scale that are historically unprecedented. The tradition that they draw upon (the emergence of FS as a metadiscipline) is itself only a few decades old. So it is entirely understandable that not every initiative will succeed. It follows that the closure of any single IOF

- or even a number of them - should not be taken to indicate that societies do not need well-grounded foresight. The opposite is the case. IOFs provide a range of vital services for societies undergoing the stress of rapid structural change.

What services do institutions of foresight provide?

Several years ago a survey of a sample of internationally significant IOFs provided an overview of their activities. Here is a summary of the services they provided. First, they *raised issues of common concern* that are overlooked in the conventional short-term view, for example, issues about peace, environmental stability, inter-generational ethics, the implications of new, and expected, innovations, both social and technical. Second, they *opened out the forward view* and, in so doing, highlighted dangers, alternatives and choices that need to be considered before they become urgent. Third, they *publicised the emerging picture of the near-term future* in order to involve the public and contribute to present-day decision-making. Fourth, they *contributed to a body of knowledge about foresight implementation* and the macro-processes of continuity and change that frame the future. Fifth, they *identified some of the dynamics and policy implications of the transition to sustainability*. Sixth, they *identified aspects of a new world order* so as to place these on the global political agenda. Seventh, they *facilitated the development and application of social innovations*. Eighth, they *helped people to deal with fears and become genuinely empowered* to participate in creating the future. Ninth, they *helped organisations to evolve* in appropriate ways. Finally, they *provided institutional shelters* for innovative people and for experimental, or public interest futures work which, perhaps, could not easily be carried out elsewhere.⁴

Such contributions helped in many practical ways to initiate and support the crucial shifts of perception, policy and practice which, in no small way, form the pivot upon which our over-heated and over-extended global 'megaculture' now turns.

Rise and fall of Australia's commission for the future

As a pioneering Institution of Foresight (IOF) the CFF was, throughout its life, under-equipped and under-designed. It attempted to carry out a wide range of projects and initiatives, many of which were intended to raise public awareness. But projects were usually issues-based and it was not until rather late in the piece that standard futures methodologies (to enable more sophisticated options) were even contemplated. In this it differed from many other IOFs. The initial selection of staff was dictated more by a political agenda than a professional one, and this coloured the nature of the organisation from the start. It is startling to realise that at no time thereafter did any full-time employee possess a background in FS. To be fair, qualified futurists were not, and are still not, very numerous. But neither

were steps taken to ensure that key staff acquired the necessary grounding. So the CFF was indeed flawed from the very beginning. Hence it is reasonable to conclude that the *impulse* underlying its creation was well founded, but the *execution* failed for a number of reasons. These include the following.

- Lack of comparative knowledge from other foresight contexts.
- Role conflicts that arose from being dependent upon a government department (Science); whereas futures work arises from a wider context and may involve challenging political priorities.
- The specialised knowledge, concepts, methodologies etc. available in FS were prematurely dismissed (in favour of consciousness-raising). These resources could have helped the CFF to develop in more productive and professional ways.
- Lack of clarity about the purposes and practices of futures work created a policy vacuum which made it difficult to adjudicate the many claims made upon the CFF and especially its director(s).
- There was a consistent failure to employ suitably qualified personnel with a background in FS.⁵

Against the early criticisms were a number of successes. The *Greenhouse Project* was probably the most successful of all CFF initiatives in that it helped make the concept a household term in Australia. The *Bicentennial Futures Education Project* (BFEP) helped to place futures studies on the educational map and produced some useful materials. The CFF also produced a range of other publications, some of reasonable, or better, quality. Also, an intense schedule of public briefings, radio shows, parliamentary seminars and the like certainly helped to influence public understanding and raised the profile of concerns such as innovation, re-cycling and the meaning of ‘the clever country’.

The glossy journal *21C* was the most high profile of the CFFs publications. Its own rise and fall parallels that of the CFF in some ways.⁶ It was launched in 1990 as an over-designed, large-format, magazine with the sub-title ‘Previews of a Changing World’ and a fairly standard menu of futures-related articles. Several years later it was taken over by a commercial publisher that, in 1998, pulled the plug due to lack of advertising. Over eight years and 26 issues it had evolved from the simplistic ‘previews’ format to a highly specialised one catering to a limited, but discriminating, readership. The subject matter had changed. *21C* had become an ultra-sophisticated cultural studies journal with a focus on ‘the impact of technology on culture’. The design standards were exemplary; but it had perhaps wandered too far into the exploration of what I can only call ‘the detritus of post-modernism’: the realm of post-modern gurus, technological breakthroughs, media and, especially, the world of the internet. Yet *21C* was certainly one of the most (if not the most) exciting and original publications ever produced in Australia and its demise left a significant gap both there and overseas.

Meanwhile the CFF had continued on its own long, meandering journey via the regimes initiated by four very different directors. When the last resigned in 1996 there was a significant hiatus while the board considered its options. The position of director was advertised, but a director was never appointed. A rapprochement with Monash University, in Melbourne, was pursued, but failed. Finally, an office minder was hired on a part-time basis and at that time the CFF ceased to be a viable entity. By late 1997 the web site had been virtually abandoned. Perhaps the last creative gasp was the belated attempt in 1998 to launch a *Future Directions* newsletter. But the modest eight-page format was unoriginal and unproven; the nearly AUD \$200 annual fee too high to attract sufficient subscribers. *Future Directions* expired in June 1998 after only three issues.

Looking back over the 10-12 years of its existence it is a mistake to conclude that the CFF was, in any way, a waste of time or money. Rather, it encountered forces that it was ill equipped to face, let alone resolve. The fact that such institutions are still rare, are not widely supported, and are certainly not widely understood, points beyond the analysis of any particular IOF to the wider social context in which they are embedded. In other words, the experience of the CFF reveals something about the 'shadow side' of human societies.

Acknowledging 'the shadow' in human societies

It is not difficult to focus a critique of first-generation IOFs such as Australia's CFF on weaknesses in the original design, deficiencies in the way they were or are administered and led and the half-hearted nature of their 'stop/start' work programs. There is some truth in all of these. But, in the context outlined above, this limited diagnosis is both unconvincing and insufficient. An explanation of a different order is suggested; one that allows us to build on the mistakes and the successes of organisations like the CFF, and to move forward.

On the bright, up-beat side of human experience, most people are keenly aware of the way that powerful new technologies are being promoted with the promise that they will support millions of people in unprecedented wealth and comfort. But, at a deeper level, few really believe it - least of all the young. If we look deep within 'the shadow' (i.e. the repressed contents of the human mind, both individual and collective) we find all the familiar defence mechanisms: avoidance, denial, lack of interest etc. As we've seen, although Dystopian futures are highly plausible, and founded in well-known facts, such prospects remain anathema to dominant institutions and the mass media and are thus ignored (except in entertainment where the rehearsal of disaster is a familiar theme, and one that is readily trivialised or dismissed). Yet, as we've seen, leading practitioners within FS continue to suggest that the future of civilisation may hang between two worlds or, more appropriately, two kinds of world.⁷ One is where the balance swings away from foresight and we learn (if we learn at all) through the kinds of social experience seen in the collapse of other civilisations, though on an immeasurably

wider scale. The other is where humankind negotiates the end of the industrial period with foresight, elegance and skill and finds new ways to live on this over-stressed planet. In this latter world the ability to create and utilise a range of forward views becomes a functional necessity.

It is clear that our concerns must go beyond particular attempts at institutional innovation and consider the hidden ‘software’ of our societies and major institutions. This clearly points to the fundamental assumptions, the views of reality that still govern them. We have encountered these earlier. They include notions of growth, of a powerful but defective economics, the primacy of the marketing imperative, the view of nature as a mere resource, of materialism, of the future as ‘an empty space.’ All are powerful aspects of an existing worldview - though their ‘use by’ dates have, in many cases, long expired. It is within this arena of ill-considered, but deeply embedded, cultural commitments and presuppositions that we may find the most profound explanation about why IOFs in recent years have had an up-hill battle, and why some of them no longer exist. At present forward thinking is neither a political habit, a widespread commercial practice nor a popular pastime.

But if IOFs became a more effective social force this could change very quickly.

Design principles for second-generation IOFs

First-generation IOFs were created largely in isolation from each other and in the absence of a body of applied knowledge about how foresight work in the public interest can, or should be, carried out. Yet in the early twenty-first century there are enough case studies, enough accumulated experience, to derive some guidelines, or design principles, for a new generation of IOFs. The challenge is to assemble a body of applied knowledge that will form a more durable foundation.

An outline research agenda was set out in 1995.⁸ Still earlier sources are the materials gathered by Clem Bezold and his associates on state government foresight in the USA, and Lindsay Grant’s book on *Foresight and National Decisions*.⁹ There are also occasional more general overview-type studies such as that carried out by Skumanich and Silbernagel in 1997. These researchers studied what they termed seven ‘best-in-kind’ foresight programs and concluded that the most successful ones had the following features.

- They began with a perceived need to prepare for future challenges.
- They each had ‘program champions’ during the start-up period.
- They proved responsive to client needs.
- They involved the relevant participants in the process.
- They experienced a legitimising process.¹⁰

These are useful insights and it was, perhaps, the last factor that weighed heavily against the CFF. It was widely seen as a politically driven entity, rather a commercial, academic or professional one. It won few friends in the parliament, in business, in education, in intellectual circles or in contemporary social movements. Thus for most of its life it lurched from one crisis to another, despite the best efforts of the board and successive directors.

What, then, are the next steps? The following suggestions arise in the context of the CFF and other examples.¹¹ They will need to be critiqued, checked and supplemented by further work. Yet they provide some clear starting points for enquiry and practice in this still under-developed, but increasingly vital realm.

Define core purposes

The core purposes of any IOF should be carefully defined and linked with the main institutional functions (as in a successful business). In other words, there must be a clear match between purposes and the structures created to sustain them. For example, there is little merit in creating a ‘soft’, inspirational, consciousness-raising operation if the main clients are likely to be results-oriented government or business people. Ends and means must be appropriate to the chosen purposes. Standing behind these considerations lie deeper ones that relate to the IOS. From the UL, what stages of consciousness are involved? What lines and levels of development characterise the director and practitioners? From the LL, what is the form of the organisational culture and what LL values does it embody? Also, how can these be operationalised in RH contexts?

Funding

Funding issues are absolutely central to the success of an IOF. Hence a secure, diversified basis of financial support should be established as soon as possible. During the early years IOFs are vulnerable to many hazards, not least of which is running out of funds. Two starting strategies are as follows. One is to secure benefactor funding. This means locating an organisation or an individual who will elect to support the new entity because they believe it is worth doing, that is, that there are intrinsic and/or tangible benefits. Such support is certainly available if it is sought in the right places. There is, for example, a substantial overlap between the concerns of foresight and those of philanthropy, both conceived as enterprises that are deeply concerned with long-term social well-being. A second approach is to establish a ‘fee for service’ operation from the outset. If successful, this becomes a source of ‘hard’ money that will not suddenly disappear. By ‘fee for service’ is meant a viable product or service that is offered for sale. It may be a series of foresight-related courses or seminars, a new approach to consulting or a publication such as the Worldwatch Institute’s *State of the World* series. Whatever strategy is pursued the IOF needs to ‘pre qualify’ itself in order to be taken seriously and trusted. These issues are immensely important and an AQAL

approach is, perhaps, the best way to approach them. At the very least it means that all bases (in each of the four quadrants) are taken into consideration.

Contextual knowledge

The knowledge gained from other foresight initiatives around the world should be thoroughly understood and applied such that the learning curve can begin from a higher level and occur more quickly. There is nothing more futile than for different foresight initiatives to be each re-inventing similar ‘wheels’, as it were. (This often happens because people appear to want to ‘do their own thing’ and thus overlook perfectly appropriate options that already exist. Here, yet again, and standing behind generalised concerns about ‘ego’ is where issues of developmental lines and levels clearly become significant.) In order to make the very best use of scarce resources and personnel, every effort should be made to learn about the nature, work and strategies involved in other IOF initiatives, past and present. In part this means that the channels of communication between widely dispersed IOFs should be open and facilitative. Contextual knowledge also emerges from overall immersion in an AQAL perspective, as well as from the considered use of some of the newer LH methods such as CLA and metascanning.
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Quality control

This is of such overwhelming importance that it is recommended as a central principle of operation for any IOF. One reason for this is that there are many myths and misunderstandings about FS and futures work in general. *Second rate futures work is worse than none at all because it provides spurious grounds for the dismissal of the whole enterprise.* As discussed above, measures for quality control include: external refereeing, benchmarking, best practice criteria and the adoption of a code of professional ethics.¹³ Beyond this quality control can also be approached through the integral methodological pluralism outlined here. In this view, it will be recalled, ‘everyone is right’ but ‘some truths are more true than others’. It therefore becomes vital to understand the nature of progressively more embracing truths and the mutually supportive necessity of each. Quality here is directly related to epistemological sophistication.

Qualified employees

Those with leading roles in IOFs must be fully qualified to carry out futures work. This means, in part, that most employees will have formal qualifications and recent relevant experience of futures-related work. (Or, if not, they will undertake the necessary training). While a consequence encouraging professionalism in FS work may be exclusion of some (at least initially) this is a minor concern compared with that of creating durable, professionally run organisations. What is meant by ‘qualified’ has also evolved over the last few years. With the opening up of foresight work to the new distinctions offered by a full AQAL perspective,

as well as to greatly increased breadth and depth, there is greater leeway to seek out certain profiles and capacities as revealed by careful UL analysis.¹⁴

Use of robust methods

As noted above, futures methodologies have continued to develop. The field is no longer limited to the earlier RH methods such as forecasting, trend extrapolation and scenarios. These will remain significant in relation to the empirical dimensions of futures problems. But more advanced work will also integrate other approaches. A three-fold division into empirical, critical and interpretative approaches was suggested some years ago.¹⁵ This was a useful way of stimulating the wider exploration and use of futures methods which go beyond the pop-futurist habit of merely re-hashing surface understandings which are normally both highly problematic and culture-bound. Other LH methods were outlined earlier

Constituencies of support

Particular attention must be paid to building up and sustaining the constituencies upon which such enterprises depend. This is a challenging task since the spread of interests is clearly very wide. In this regard, full and proper use should be made of all available media outlets to ensure that they are informed in good time of all initiatives, publications etc. Key figures in relevant areas should be consulted and valued. Obviously all of the above takes time. Yet so vital is this area that the appointment of at least a part-time PR individual need not be seen as a luxury. It goes without saying that all IOFs require a board comprised of leading people from key social and economic areas to tenaciously pursue the interests of the organisation. Such work embraces basic fund-raising as well as the search for social legitimisation (see below). Another aspect of this is communications.

Communication

One of the greatest lacks at the present time is a dedicated channel of communication for IOFs and those who work in them. Of course, all are loosely connected by the internet, journals and some international futures organisations such as the World Futures Studies Federation (WFSF). One option is to establish a more formal association to assemble foresight knowledge and expertise in more coherent and reliable forms. Another is to host special-interest gatherings in collaboration with, for example, WFS and WFSF conferences. Overall, it is vital that IOFs communicate with similar organisations around the world and begin to: share expertise, organise meetings, pool efforts in common projects and, perhaps, to begin to 'speak with one voice' across cultures and national boundaries. IOFs that begin to cooperate in these ways will be able to wield far greater social and symbolic power than any of them could working alone. Yet another aspect of this issue is the need for IOFs based in universities to begin to coordinate their research priorities and programs.

Legitimation

The parent field of FS is arguably progressing along its own path toward full social and professional legitimation. That is, it is emerging as a serious and substantive entity that can contribute in a host of ways to the framing of policy and practice in many, many fields. If, as a group of organisations dedicated to some of the ends outlined here, IOFs are able to set themselves appropriate tasks to serve their constituencies in a competent, consistent and high-quality way, they too will follow this path. It will then become self-fulfilling: IOFs will finally have ‘arrived’ in the sense of having established their social, economic and professional viability. They will be seen as legitimate, socially vital organisations called forth by the historical conditions of our time and serving a range of profound human interests.

Research

In order to unify IOFs around the world, there is a need for an intensive program of work to carry out tasks such as the following.

- To document as much institutional foresight activity as possible. This will form the history of the discipline of foresight work. It will record the emergence of this sub-field and its early attempts to become established. Such material will need to be archived in suitably accessible ways.
- To investigate particular IOF case studies in order to draw out, check, critique, create and re-create the essential procedures and principles of operation that minimise failure and maximise the chances of success in particular contexts.
- To explore ways of functioning, modes of cooperation and the like that will increase the efficiency and effectiveness of IOF work around the world.
- To evaluate the outcomes of IOF activity in relation to appropriate professional standards.
- To explore the connections between related fields such as: foresight and philanthropy, foresight and integral studies etc.
- To evolve common strategies to secure long-term funding for IOF activity in the public interest.

Given appropriate investment and steady work over a period of time IOFs can be created and sustained into the distant future. They will be instrumental in helping to shift society away from its currently short-sighted and dangerous trajectory.

Notes and References

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